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SAY GRACE

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: Luke 18:9-14, Colossians 1:11-20

"...may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks..."
Colossians 1:11,12 (NRSV)

We used to call it "saying grace," an odd way to put it. What it meant was "say thank you." Say gratitude. Say the grace I was told and what I said without much variation was what I had been taught. "God is great, God is good. Let us thank him for this food..." or when Dad was at work and we wanted to see how much irreverence we could get away with... "Here's the bread. Here's the meat. Good God, let's eat." Elemental, simple prayers of thanksgiving. There is a theological reason why it is called "saying grace"; namely there is something more basic than whatever gratitude we happen to be feeling at mealtime — and it is the mystery and givenness of creation, the gift of life itself, the miracle of our being. To acknowledge that, to stand or sit in awe before it, to say thank you for that basic grace is very close to the purpose of religion.

It also provides moments of wonderful humanity. To our table years ago we had invited a Synod Executive and his wife who we deeply admired and who was my friend and mentor until his death several years ago. Jim Sala, too sick to be here, wrote the Charge to the Pastor for my Service of Installation as he had for every one of my installations: this time David Donovan read it.

In any event Jim and Helen sat at our formica-top table for Sunday dinner,and I asked him to "say the grace" for us. We bowed our heads. Jim was bald on top — completely, although he had a fairly generous wreath of hair around the perimeter. So, when he bowed his head at our table our three-year-old saw something she had never seen before. "Daddy," she exclaimed, "he has a hole in his head." We laughed about it for years and the incident itself became a metaphor for the blessing of his friendship.

Before it is anything else, religion is something akin to awe, praise, adoration, Frederick Buechner says begins when poetry begins with a lump in your throat. The basic religious act is thanksgiving before the enormous mystery of life, the unaccountable fact of our being.

It accounts, I think, for the durability of the Thanksgiving holiday which, after all, is pretty tame and simple compared to say the Fourth of July or Christmas. It is, someone noticed, the one holiday that has successfully avoided much commercialization. People don't buy special clothes for it. Homes are not decorated, at least elaborately; there are few gifts. It is a time for gratitude for basic things, life itself, food to eat, friends, family, a day to "say grace."

New Testament scholar John Koenig says that praise and thanksgiving are a heartbeat within the New Testament. He points out that there are two hundred occasions of our being urged by the New Testament to give God thanks and praise, even when there don't appear to be any reasons for being glad and grateful.

Over and over again Paul urges his readers to assume a basic posture of gratitude no matter what is happening to them. It's almost as if things will be better regardless of what's happening if only you can express gratitude. And in a way that's right. To be grateful is to be more whole. Psychologists know that a basic stance of gratitude toward other people and life in general — seeing the grace in every day, every person, every new experience — is one component at least of emotional health. C. S. Lewis, who lived through some very dark days as his beloved wife died of cancer said, "Praise seems to be inner health made audible." [*Reflections on the Psalms,* p. 80] I think we know that intuitively. It's why we insist on teaching our little ones to say "thank you" as soon as they are able to talk. We know that they need — not the givers of gifts, the providers of food and shelter — but they, the children, for their own sakes, need to learn how to say grace.

Is there any situation more uncomfortable and awkward than to send a gift and not be thanked? It's not that you need the "thank you" particularly, but until it comes you're never sure that the gift arrived, that it was received, never sure that your love or whatever it was you were sending in the form of the gift, was accepted, understood, received. A "thank you" closes the loop of grace and it is not closed until it is done. A friend of mine says that's why she became a minister in mid-life. Twenty- five years before she had done the unthinkable, the unpardonable - if not sin, then social faux pas. She enjoyed a large and elaborate wedding with many, many gifts and never wrote thank you notes. With her proper and strict upbringing she carried the burden of her guilt all her life and laughingly suggests that she resorted to theological seminary as a kind of radical penance.

There is basic emotional and spiritual wholeness in the experience and expressions of gratitude, the wholehearted and exuberant love for the world, our own lives. It is a good thing to say grace... in all circumstances.

What Paul was getting at in all this cheerleading, all this urging people who, after all, were not in such great circumstances, a tiny minority, often persecuted, hated, misunderstood, terrified by the determined hostility of the authorities.... What Paul was getting at, of course, is that amazing grace which transcends the immediate situation — that incredible miracle that in Jesus Christ God loves us, and is with us, and blesses us, and will forever keep us safe.

When Christians say grace, it is for that as well.

In the portion of a letter to the Colossians, which we heard, the theme is introduced: "May you be prepared to endure everything, giving thanks to the Father."

And then shift, a hymn to Christ, which among other things describes him as the firstborn of creation, the one in whom all things were created; the one in whom all things hold together; the one in whom God is pleased to dwell and through whom God is reconciled to all people. It's expansive and soaring, what the scholars call "High Christology" and you can almost hear it in Gregorian Chant with the smoke of the incense rising into the mysterious darkness of the cathedral.

At the time, in addition to persecution from the authorities the Church was engaged in a fierce argument about what, if anything, Jesus Christ had to do with this world — this earth — these bodies of ours — this creation. This little hymn is important because it cuts to the heart of the question — the reason why we feel basic gratitude.

The argument was with people called Gnostics. You may have heard of them. Some people still think like the Gnostics. The Gnostics assumed that the material world was evil, that God could have nothing to do with it. In fact, the Gnostics reasoned God could not have had anything to do with creation. Creation must have been carried out by a lesser deity, one of God's appointees, a kind of junior executive.

The Gnostics had a big problem with Jesus because he was so human, so earthy, so they tried to spiritualize him and at all costs keep him distinct from the God of creation who picks up a ball of mud and makes human beings, who fumes and fusses and laughs and rages and weeps and scolds and forgives and loves passionately through the pages of Hebrew Scripture.

So in this hymn we hear the early church saying what it believed. "Saying grace." The God of creation is the same God who came among us in Jesus Christ. The God of the incarnation is also the God of the creation. Something essential is lost when religion focuses only on this world, to be sure. But something equally important is lost when faith focuses on sin, forgiveness and salvation and ignores the basic mystery of the created order.

One of the first things the Bible says about God is that God created the world, stepped back and took a long look at the creation and called it good. The word, Walter Brueggemann suggests, really means "lovely." Now that is a very important idea: the created order is good and lovely. It is important because religion has so often come to the opposite conclusion, namely that creation is not good and not lovely, but rather dirty, to be avoided, or to be ashamed of, to be repressed or overcome.

Think of how much human religion can be described by that sad litany. But the basic and radical Biblical word is that creation is lovely: creation is grace and the first word to be said about it is "thank you."

It has been suggested by historians of culture that the environmental disaster in which we find ourselves is a result of Western Christianity forgetting the basic goodness and loveliness of creation, the old argument with Gnosticism, and focusing all its attention on sin, confession and redemption. Catholic theologian Matthew Fox gets himself in a lot of trouble with the Vatican by saying things like that and by reminding us that 300 years ago the church decided that science, the academic inquiring into the mysteries of creation, the world, nature, the universe, was hostile to religion and should be kept at a distance and, when necessary, repressed. It seemed to me heavily ironical that just a few weeks ago the church finally apologized for its condemnation of Galileo.

Isn't it fascinating that science, which for centuries, including this one, we thought might be the enemy, now speaks a word that sounds Biblical, a word I think is occasionally more faithful to the creation than the word of religion. Lewis Thomas, President Emeritus of the Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, a physician and a biologist, speaks about creation with deep reverence and when he says his grace sounds like an Old Testament prophet.

> "Human beings simply cannot go on as they now are going, exhausting the earth's resources, altering the composition of the earth's atmosphere, depleting the numbers and varieties of other species upon whose survival we, in the end, depend. It is not simply wrong, it is a piece of stupidity on the grandest scale."

And then, at the end of the book, this consummate man of science who never uses the word God turns mystic, almost theological.

> "One thing eludes me, always has and likely always will; if the earth is what I think it is, an immense being, intact and coherent, does it have a mind? If it does, what does it think?"

So science, if we listen carefully, will help us "say grace."

And when rigid piety will not allow us to rejoice in the creation, or merely our busy life in this busy city embraced by steel and concrete — art, music, poetry can be counted on to speak with integrity and eloquence: Van Gogh painting his brilliant sun flowers and vivid iris as he descended into the darkness of despair and depression.

Every time we sing the favorite hymn, "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee," we are singing Ludwig Van Beethoven's personal affirmation of praise and gratitude for the gift of creation, as he descended into the silence of deafness. "The Ode to Joy," Beethoven "saying his grace."

Or e. e. cummings' poetic explosion of grateful praise:

> "i thank you God for most this amazing day:for the leaping,greenly spirits of trees and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything which is natural which is infinite which is yes."

Every autumn when the Pennsylvania mountains turned brilliant red and gold, the one who taught me how to say grace would send a copy of her favorite poem.

"O world, I cannot hold thee close enough!
Thy winds, thy wide gray skies!
Thy mists that roll and rise!
Lord, I do fear
Thous't made the world too
beautiful this year."
[*God's World*, Edna St. Vincent Millay]

Matthew Fox says we ought to spend less time thinking about original sin and more time celebrating our "original blessing."

Fox says we ought to fall in love at least three times a day - with another person, with an animal, a tree or flower and with a little Mozart. Falling in love every day with Mozart, he advises, can keep you joyfully busy for seven years. [See *Creation Spirituality*, p. 30]

So, say your grace. Open your eyes. Lift up your head and heart and give voice to your gratitude. Thank someone today for being who he or she is. Thank them for being whatever they are for you. Facing a difficult decision, surgery, a persistent problem with a relationship? Give St. Paul the benefit of the doubt. Start with gratitude for your own resources, the skill of the doctor, the good things about the person with whom you are having trouble and see if saying grace doesn't transform it. Say your grace, quietly in worship, and in some new act of responsibility for this wondrously fashioned and redeemed creation.

Among other things Thanksgiving in our culture is the beginning of Christmas. Advent arrives next Sunda and we will begin officially and liturgically with our somber purples and lovely music. But last evening the lights went on up and down Michigan Avenue and yesterday the first Christmas carols were heard from the Salvation Army trumpets and sometime this week we'll get out the Christmas albums and tapes and discs.

That used to bother me — that confusing mystery of celebrations, that premature and forced cheer. It doesn't bother me any more. It's a good thing I have come to believe, in the middle of Thanksgiving, for the bounty and goodness and loveliness of creation, to find ourselves drawn forward to that indescribable gift of love and grace; to praise the God of creation who in Jesus Christ makes all things new, who promises to love us and to be with us and from whom nothing, not even our own death, will separate us.

To begin — a whole season of thanksgiving, gratitude for creation, which moves gently but with the inevitability of birth itself, to that loveliest of creation's lovely mysteries — a child, our savior, our joy, our peace.

Thanks be to God.